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978-0-521-09630-0 - Jane Austen
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INTRODUCTORY

About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it. She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage. But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them. *Mansfield Park*, Chapter 1 (1814)

These are the opening sentences of a novel, the third published by Jane Austen, that appeared in the year that saw the publication of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*. The interest aroused by *Mansfield Park* was a mere ripple beside the tide of enthusiasm that met Scott's historical fiction. Yet her reputation has risen steadily; in our own times it has been written of her, that

she not only makes tradition for those coming after, but...creates the tradition we see leading down to her. Her work, like the work of all great creative writers, gives a meaning to the past.[1]

And while that part of Scott's enormous output that deals with the heroism and humanity of common people in a familiar setting shares today something of the critical acclaim accorded to Jane Austen's work, the reputation of his historical novels (so great in his and Jane Austen's time) has been seen to dwindle into comparative insignificance.

Such changes in literary taste serve a useful function, for though they might seem for a time unfair, they focus attention on different aspects of a writer's quality and sensibility. Sometimes they betray a good deal about the *readers*, and the ideas that are common in their generation. Readers of fiction today do not care

[1] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948).

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as much for historical novels as did those of a century and a half ago; the loss of interest in a part of Scott's work and its revival in another is a symptom of this fact. But the view that Jane Austen's writing gives 'a meaning to the past' does not merely illuminate some part of her work that had been shadowed by public neglect. It gives her a special and honoured place in the centre of the great tradition of the English novel, and pays tribute to her achievement in creating a fictional world whose values have a real relevance to universally experienced human dilemmas.

Can this really be so? Jane Austen refers, with some casualness, to 'all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income', but a reader of her novels today could probably not, without some specialised information, estimate Sir Thomas's income at all accurately. Jane Austen's contemporaries would, by virtue of their accumulated experience, have been able to grasp her exact meaning better than we can. More important than mere calculation of pounds, shillings, and pence, they would have understood the nature of those accompanying 'comforts', appreciated the advance in rank and importance (or *consequence*) made by the lucky Maria, and the irony implicit in Jane Austen's use of the plural could not have escaped them, knowing as they did that her marriage would bring Maria luxury and a pleasant sense of her own importance, the usual rewards or *consequences* of such an elevation in society. New readers of Jane Austen's novels cannot, for obvious reasons, bring experience of quite this kind to the enjoyment of her writing. The world we know well, whether Ghanaian, Canadian, or Ceylonese, is very different from the world she knew, in externals at least. The social customs she takes for granted are so different from those obtaining even in Britain today that British readers might feel, quite as much as those of any other country or nation, that the fluctuations of the Huntingdon marriage market as described in the passage above have nothing to do with them. We might all prefer to believe that the pressures exerted upon young women to win security for themselves by exploiting their physical attractions as deliberately as hunters bait traps (for what else are we to understand by Jane Austen's delicate, yet devastating use in this context of the old-

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fashioned word *captivate*?) belong to an imaginary country-town world of the nineteenth century that has become with time quite remote from our own lives and from contemporary problems.

How, then, does it happen that though Jane Austen's characters move strictly within a framework fashioned upon the social milieu of Regency England, the reader of her novels is continually led to make fresh discoveries about himself, about other people, and about the hitherto uncontested values of his world?

Let us look again at the last sentence of the quoted passage:

> But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world as there are pretty women to deserve them.

Do we accept this statement? *Can* we assent to its implications? It is amusing, certainly; but only superficially, for the authoritative manner in which it is phrased compels serious consideration, seems to declare that easy laughter is not enough. Acceptance of it implies a willingness to believe physical beauty as admirable an attribute as moral integrity or good sense, and a rich husband as being necessarily one worth striving to acquire: a readiness, in fact, to condone society's tendency to judge men according to their incomes, and women according to their faces. Any kindly satisfaction the unwary reader may have felt at Maria's unexpected good fortune—*she* thinks herself lucky, too!—must be shattered when such subtly ambiguous phrasing unites with an (apparently) matter-of-fact tone to point the irresponsibility of attitudes such as these. We may deny that the sentence voices our personal point of view, but we must acknowledge the existence of people who think and act in apparent obedience to it, and admit the universality with which these 'principles' operate in the society we know. Jane Austen's power to speak clearly to our generation, and to readers in any English-speaking society, springs from our admiration of her deft use of language, from the alertness and uncertainty that it awakes in us, successfully removing any complacency created earlier by the deceptive tranquillity of her style—*and from our acknowledgment of the relevance and fidelity of her ironic vision to life as we know it to be in our own world.*

Jane Austen quite deliberately excluded from her work all sensational or decorative material, however intrinsically interesting

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or historically important, concentrating her attention upon the thoughts and feelings, motives and prejudices of men and women. Her choice of a setting for them was sensible: by placing them in the world she knew best, she gave them the solidity they must have to convince us of their truth to life, and spared herself the laborious creation of an unfamiliar milieu. We have only to compare the casual gesture that indicates the wealth and elegance of Mansfield ('all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income') with the brilliantly detailed fragment that follows it, to see how her method allows her to go swiftly through and beyond the social externals of her novels to what really interested her:

All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it.

Are these people really enthusiastic about the marriage? Their 'exclamations' at its *greatness*, and its *advantage* to Maria and her sisters suggest an open, probably uncharitable discussion of the match, for the emphasis seems to be on *surprise* rather than on pleasure or joy at Miss Maria's happiness. This impression is reinforced by the mercenary calculations of her uncle. The word that sets this briefly glimpsed character apart from the rest as worthy of special attention—*himself*—prepares the reader for some important opinion. As an elder relation of the lady's his views are to be respected, and as a lawyer presumably experienced in money transactions and marriage settlements, his words carry some weight. And what are those words? Maria, he considers, has done very well; the property she has acquired is worth far more than she has had to pay for it. She has made an excellent business investment! This judgment, based on a careful estimation of the current market prices, shows us that social recognition of the match is by no means denied, but clearly discernible in the chorus of congratulation are envious, spiteful overtones, and a habitual application of market terms to human relationships such as those of love and marriage. In a single sentence that captures the very tones and phrases of 'polite' conversation, Jane Austen lays bare the moral chasms in elegant and respectable society.

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Avoiding the sensational, the melodramatic, and the unfamiliar, she is able by means of fine discrimination in the matter of choice of setting and subject-matter, to draw character in its true proportions, as revealed in the thoughts and actions of people so vividly realised that they seem to become real persons.

This is not to say that Jane Austen's settings serve merely as suitable backgrounds for her characters. On the contrary, although the details of a landscape or an interior are never dwelt on for their own sake, the country-houses, towns and fields of her novels take on a vivid life because they live in and through the characters. Let us consider the passage below, for example, taken from *Northanger Abbey*:

> An abbey! yes, it was delightful to be really in an abbey! but she doubted, as she looked round the room, whether any thing within her observation, would have given her the consciousness. The furniture was in all the profusion and elegance of modern taste. The fire-place, where she had expected the ample width and ponderous carving of former times, was contracted to a Rumford ...The windows, to which she looked with peculiar dependence, from having heard the General talk of his preserving them in their Gothic form with reverential care, were yet less what her fancy had portrayed. To be sure, the pointed arch was preserved—the form of them was Gothic—they might be even casements—but every pane was so large, so clear, so light! To an imagination which had hoped for the smallest divisions, and the heaviest stone-work, for painted glass, dirt and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing.

Catherine Morland's feelings range from delight to distress as she looks about her, and Jane Austen's description of Northanger Abbey tells us a great deal about the mood of the young woman through whose eyes we see it. Visiting a country house that is larger and more impressive than any she has ever seen, Catherine is disappointed—not because it is oldfashioned or badly kept, but because each new sign of cleanliness and modernity strikes at her hopes that she will be living in a romantic ruin. Her imagination has been inflamed by the sensational fiction she has been reading, and she must be helped through many similar disappointments and disillusionments by her friends' sympathy and her own good sense and courage before she is able to appreciate that real life is very different from Gothic novels, and a good deal more interesting. Jane Austen's description of the Abbey

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becomes in this way much more than a sketch of an appropriate background for the action of the novel; it is an exposition of an important stage in Catherine's journey to maturity, and as such it contributes to the novel's main theme.

While the organic nature of writing such as this and those elements that illustrate the relation of her art to tradition have attracted much praise from modern critics of Jane Austen's work, there are many other reasons for the high opinion in which her novels are held. She has been commended for her fine control of language, her mastery of the art of ironic exposure, for her discrimination in rejecting eighteenth-century fashions in fiction, for her deliberate limitation of the scope of her novels in order to produce great art, her habit of constant, painstaking revision; and for the subtlety with which she handles point of view to mark the developing relationships between her characters. Her genius for comedy has delighted readers of each succeeding age, but perhaps the modern critic has been above all impressed by her power to externalise personal problems in those of her heroines, her ability to discipline herself through the act of writing creatively, and by her 'moral concern, perplexity, and commitment'.[1]

The truth of these judgments and the value of their contribution to our appreciation of Jane Austen's writing do not, unfortunately, outweigh their tendency to make of her a writer's writer, or worse, a critic's writer. The terms used are those of academic criticism, and the general reader tends to be wary of them. The great admiration Jane Austen has aroused at another level, too, does not encourage a new reader, for much more of it is affectionate than serious, or even sober. Enthusiasts who have labelled her work 'quaint', 'charming', 'whimsical', and 'delightful' have done Jane Austen a disservice by severely limiting the numbers and quality of her readers; the myth of her lightweight attractions has sent some serious readers elsewhere, in the belief that her novels hold pleasure only for the romantic and the sentimental. Nothing could be further from the truth:

> But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them.

[1] Andrew H. Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels. A Study in Structure* (1953).

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Only a superficial reading could create or support the impression that Jane Austen is a harmlessly amusing purveyor of romantic social comedy. On the contrary, she cannot be completely enjoyed or even partly understood, except by readers who bring the most alert and critical attention to her novels. Those who take the above and similar sentences at their face-value can read and re-read the six novels, and never cease to praise the gentle charm of 'dear Jane'. But a careful reader cannot miss the irony implicit in the maxim that only the fair deserve the rich, with its criticism of a society that provided no satisfactory alternative to marriage for portionless women, pretty or plain. Jane Austen's tone is exquisitely poised between ironic detachment and protest at the immorality and injustice of accepted social values. To miss this is to miss an element in her writing that has been called 'subversive', a continual flow of critical perceptiveness beneath the smooth, socially 'acceptable' surface of her tone.

Who was Jane Austen? The facts of her quiet, uneventful life can be very simply stated. Born in 1775 in Steventon, a village in southern England, the younger daughter of a country clergyman, Jane Austen distributed the greater part of her life between visits to Bath, London, and Kent. She had six brothers, all older than herself, with whose families she and her elder sister, Cassandra, enjoyed a close and affectionate relationship. With some of her nieces and nephews, besides Cassandra, she maintained an intimate correspondence. Until she was twenty-five years old, Jane Austen lived in her father's rectory. In 1800 she went with her parents and Cassandra Austen to Bath, and five years afterwards, on the death of the Rev. George Austen in 1806, the family moved to Southampton. In 1809 the three ladies moved to Chawton, in Hampshire, where Jane Austen lived until within a few weeks of her death. Of the six published novels, *Sense and Sensibility* appeared in November 1811, when Jane Austen was thirty-six years old, *Pride and Prejudice* in January 1813, *Mansfield Park* in May 1814, *Emma* in December 1815, and *Northanger Abbey* with *Persuasion*, posthumously, in December 1817. Her characteristic method of writing was to make an initial

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draft, which she would work upon for varied lengths of time afterwards, and subject before publication to a thorough revision. Although all her novels were published within seven years—and those the seven last of her life—three of them (the first versions of *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice*) were already in the form of initial drafts, and had been, perhaps, partially worked on, when Jane Austen left Steventon for Bath in 1800. She did not marry. Between 1816 and 1817 her health failed, and on 18 July 1817 she died, at the age of forty-two.

It does not surprise us that the surface of the novels Jane Austen wrote presents the smooth pattern of social life in the country, as led by a leisured English middle class at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ladies go walking, distribute charity to the poor, pay morning calls on one another, and delight in occasional balls or impromptu country dancing. Gentlemen hunt, shoot, read widely and converse well, and improve their property. Jane Austen's gaze penetrates, however, through the externals of the social customs and behaviour she knew so well, to the bases of human conduct.

Her partner now drew near, and said, 'That gentleman would have put me out of patience, had he staid with you half a minute longer. He has no business to withdraw the attention of my partner from me. We have entered into a contract of mutual agreeableness for the space of an evening, and all our agreeableness belongs solely to each other for that time. Nobody can fasten themselves on the notice of one, without injuring the rights of the other. I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both; and those men who do not chuse to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbours.'

'But they are such very different things!'

'—That you think they cannot be compared together.'

'To be sure not. People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together. People that dance, only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour.'

'And such is your definition of matrimony and dancing. Taken in that light certainly, their resemblance is not striking; but I think I could place them in such a view. You will allow, that in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of

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its dissolution; that it is their duty, each to endeavour to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wandering towards the perfections of their neighbours, or fancying that they should have been better off with any one else. You will allow all this?'

'Yes, to be sure, as you state it, all this sounds very well; but still they are so very different. I cannot look upon them at all in the same light, nor think the same duties belong to them.' *Northanger Abbey*, Vol. 1, Chapter 10

Catherine Morland's definition of marriage is characteristically childish but sound, placing its emphasis on the idea of a permanent union; as she is a person who brings 'fresh feelings of every sort' to each new experience, her definition of dancing is equally innocent and unsophisticated. Between people who 'stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour' a relationship must necessarily be so fleeting—and mutual understanding so superficial—that Henry Tilney's witty analogy is rejected by her. Yet, though Catherine does not have the sophistication to perceive it—and Tilney too much delicacy to point it out to her—dancing with each other is not only comparable with marriage, but a socially permitted preliminary to it. The 'duties' of dancers to each other as described by Tilney, and the conventions of the socially acceptable custom according to which Catherine and her partner have met and are moving, even as they speak, provide a framework for this and many other exchanges in Jane Austen's novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Bingley's fondness for dancing is considered 'a certain step towards falling in love'; and his dancing twice with Jane Bennet at the Meryton assembly ball inspires hopes in her mother that Jane will soon be happily settled at Netherfield. The single occasion on which Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet dance together—at the Netherfield ball—provides this pair who so rarely meet with an opportunity to explore each other's mind and motives in a situation of intimacy and privacy impossible to procure outside the ballroom, but made possible within it by the marriage-like conventions that surround dancing itself and by the very presence of other dancers in the set and the lookers-on in the crowded room who represent for this couple the society of which they are themselves a part: '...One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be

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entirely silent for half an hour together...' Elizabeth's final words to Darcy—'if I do not take your likeness now, I may never have another opportunity'—illuminate the difficulties in the way of their achieving a true understanding of each other, and demonstrate at the same time the importance of dances and balls to Jane Austen's faithfully accurate picture of country living. In *Mansfield Park*, Mr Rushworth and Maria Bertram become engaged to be married 'after dancing with each other at a proper number of balls'. The rules that have grown up around dancing—that it is a 'charming amusement for young people' particularly, although supervised and respectably chaperoned by responsible adults, that to dance twice with the same person denotes unusual interest in that person, and so on—are so generally known and adhered to, that to defy or deliberately break them becomes an act of some significance. Thus, the experienced Isabella Thorpe protests to James Morland, in *Northanger Abbey*, that to dance together a second time 'is a most improper thing, and entirely against the rules'. The speed and willingness with which she immediately breaks these 'rules' reveals her eagerness to become permanently associated with Morland in marriage. When, later in the novel, Isabella breaks her resolution of not dancing in Morland's absence, she neatly demonstrates the aptness of Henry Tilney's comparison of dancing with marriage and gives it a deeper ironic truth; her action shadows forth her future infidelity to Morland, and the ultimate breaking of their engagement to marry.

Jane Austen's use of the country dance to reveal hidden feelings and motives in her characters is matched by her use of other social diversions familiar in the everyday life of her world (such as card-games like 'Speculation' and whist in *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility*, the riddles and anagrams in *Emma*, and expeditions to places of interest in all the novels) for similar purposes. But the occasions on which lovers meet or withdraw from one another in the setting and the special atmosphere of a dance are themselves distributed so as to balance with each other within *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* in particular, creating by this means a formal grace and symmetry that is very like the

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